

Enjoy your later life

**Physical and emotional
well being for older
women**

M25972

About the factsheets

The factsheets contain information about the subjects listed on the right.

In general, each factsheet provides the following information:

- introduction
- tips to prevent the illness or ways to deal with the subject
- symptoms
- contact details for further help and advice

When to use the factsheets

We suggest the relevant factsheet(s) are given to the patient after their consultation with the doctor and/or practice nurse as a 'reminder' for the patient to read at home.

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Caring for someone else

Caring for someone else is hard work and takes time, often the time when you normally rest or relax. This may make you ill yourself, so it is important to look after your health and remember that you have needs too.

Ways to make caring easier

Here are some ways to make caring easier:

- ✓ look after yourself – you have your own health and emotional needs, so keep in regular contact with your doctor
- ✓ practical help from others:
 - friends and relatives can share the workload, ie rotas for shopping, cleaning, visits etc. You can also talk to them about how you feel and what you want to do in the future
 - join a local carers' support group, it's useful to talk to people who are in a similar situation as yourself
 - social services, local authorities and social workers may provide support for day-to-day tasks like shopping, cooking, cleaning, ie home helps, meals-on-wheels, transport facilities
- doctors, district nurses or health visitors can help you with medical issues and advise on any rest you may need
- ✓ taking a break from your caring responsibilities, to help you to 'get out of the house' or to have some time to yourself. Social services can help arrange for the person you look after to attend a day centre or have a short break in a care home
- ✓ financial help may be available from the local authority or DSS, like weekly benefits to ease day-to-day expenses or grants/loans to help adapt your home, eg a stair lift or door widening for wheelchair use etc
- ✓ legal rights – as a carer you have rights to certain help and facilities. Contact your local Citizen's Advice Bureau or the Carersline for advice and support. (See *Further help and advice*)

Pressures of being a carer

Caring for someone is rewarding, but it can be difficult and painful to see someone you love suffering.

Being a carer can be physically exhausting and emotionally stressful, and at times you may feel unsupported and alone. But remember, what you do is important and difficult and no one should be expected to do it alone – you need all the help and support you can get.

Further help and advice

- Carers National Association, 20-25 Glasshouse Yard, London EC1A 4JS

Healthy eating and exercise

It's never too late to benefit from a healthy, balanced diet and regular exercise. Diet is a matter of personal choice but some of the tips below could help give you the energy and nourishment to live and enjoy life. Exercise improves your strength, suppleness, stamina and memory.

Eating a healthy balanced diet and taking regular exercise will:

- keep your weight at a reasonable level. It isn't healthy to be either over or under weight
- help prevent serious illness like heart disease and osteoporosis (fragile bones)

If the amount you eat is not balanced with the amount of energy your body needs and uses, you may become:

- overweight - with a risk of reduced mobility, high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes. If you suffer from arthritis it could get worse
- underweight - you will have a greater risk of fractures and osteoporosis

Not enough exercise can mean you:

- gain weight or lose your appetite
- lose strength and stamina, become less mobile, more prone to aches and pains and osteoporosis. Joints become less flexible
- risk raised blood pressure, high cholesterol levels and blood clots

If you are not sure about which exercises are suitable for you or if you have any medical worries, talk to your doctor first.

Tips for a healthy, balanced diet and keeping active

For a healthy, balanced diet:

- ✓ enjoy your food and eat a variety of different foods. Generally no foods need to be excluded from your diet, it is a matter of getting the balance between the different foods right
- ✓ eat plenty of starchy foods like pasta, noodles, potatoes, rice and bread
- ✓ eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables
- ✓ don't drink more than 21 units of alcohol per week. Too much alcohol can mean an increased risk of strokes, cancer, high blood pressure and weight gain

✓ eat less fat to avoid heart disease. Check the labels on prepacked foods for fat content. Eat less fatty foods like cakes and biscuits. Trim fat from meat, and try to cook without adding fat. Eat low-fat varieties of food, especially dairy products

✓ eat high fibre wholemeal bread and chapattis, brown rice and fruit and vegetables to lower the risk of constipation and bowel problems

✓ eat food rich in calcium (for example from dairy products and bread) and vitamin D (from oily fish, margarine and cereal) to help lower the risk of osteoporosis

✓ eat food containing iron (from red meat, egg yolk, dark green leafy vegetables) to help prevent anaemia

✓ drink at least 8 non alcoholic drinks like water, milk and fruit juice every day to prevent dehydration, constipation and bowel problems

To keep active, try to:

✓ take moderate exercise every day. Walking, gardening and housework are all good forms of exercise

✓ use the stairs instead of a lift or escalator

You may find it useful to talk to an occupational therapist about which exercises are best for you.

Further help and advice

- The English Sports Council, phone 0171 273 1608
- The Women's Sport Foundation, phone 0181 697 5370
- The National Osteoporosis Society, phone 01761 471771

Keep warm, keep well

As we get older our bodies are not as good at keeping warm as they used to be and are often less sensitive to changes in external temperature. This means that older people can be cold without feeling that they are cold.

It's particularly important to keep warm if you are seriously underweight, or have a disability or illness such as chronic bronchitis, asthma or a history of heart disease or stroke.

How to keep warm and well

- ✓ keep your living and sleeping areas comfortably warm. If this is not possible or affordable, keep one room warm and preheat your bedroom before going to bed. Keep warm in bed at night. Keep your bedroom window closed at night. Using a hot water bottle can keep you warmer during the night and day (never use a hot water bottle and electric blanket together because of the risk of an electric shock)
- ✓ make sure you have some hot food and drink every day. A warm drink before going to bed may help to keep you warm. Keep a vacuum flask filled with a hot drink by your bed in case you wake up feeling cold
- ✓ make sure your home is well insulated. Draught proof doors and windows and insulate hot water cylinders and pipes. Keep curtains closed to keep in heat
- ✓ if you have problems with fuel bills, seek help straight away from the Citizens Advice Bureau, or the electricity or gas company
- ✓ try not to stay sitting down for a long time. Moving around or taking some form of exercise helps to make more heat in your body. Moving your hands and feet in particular helps your circulation
- ✓ wearing layers of clothes keeps you warmer than one very thick layer. When you go out always wear gloves, a hat or headscarf a neckscarf and strong, warm shoes or boots. At home wear a long sleeve vest or t-shirt under your clothes. Leg warmers can also keep you warm
- ✓ get help immediately if you experience the signs of hypothermia (see *Symptoms of being too cold*)

Symptoms of being too cold

Being too cold can make you feel unwell. It can also lead to a serious condition known as hypothermia.

The signs to watch for that show you may be getting too cold are:

- unusual drowsiness
- very cold skin on parts of the body normally covered by clothing, for example your stomach
- slurred speech
- not being able to feel the cold, even in a bitterly cold room

Further help and advice

- Fuel companies, listed in the phone book under 'Electricity' or 'Gas'
- NEA for advice about home insulation, phone 0191 261 5677
- Winter Warmth Line (Free), 9am - 4pm October - March, phone 0800 289 404

Preventing accidents and fractures

As we get older we react more slowly, this happens so gradually that sometimes we don't even notice, until an accident happens.

Most accidents occur in our homes, so you can try to prevent accidents before they happen.

Avoiding accidents

Stay fit

- ✓ swim, find out when it is less busy at your local leisure centre
- ✓ go for a walk or do some gardening to maintain your strength and balance
- ✓ to strengthen your joints and help to avoid fractures, try a few exercises and if you are more energetic, join a keep fit class or play a sport

The kitchen

- ✓ plan a clear workspace for dealing with hot food or liquids and point pan handles inwards
- ✓ make things easy by putting on a timer to remind you something's cooking
- ✓ avoid straining for high shelves or low cupboards and clean spillages immediately to avoid slipping

The bathroom

- ✓ run the cold water before the hot so the bath is never hot enough to scald you
- ✓ use anti-slip mats and grab rails to get in and out of the bath, fit carpets to avoid slipping

- ✓ if raising your arms to wash your hair makes you feel faint, ask some one to help you
- ✓ never use mains portable electrical appliances in the bathroom

The bedroom

- ✓ keep bedclothes and curtains away from electric heaters
- ✓ switch off your electric blanket before you get into bed and keep an eye on its condition, eg frayed edges, scorch marks – they don't last forever!
- ✓ beware of trailing flexes which could trip you
- ✓ never smoke in bed
- ✓ if you have new bifocals, take care looking down stairs

Medication

- ✓ put your daily supply of pills out in the morning, it's easier to check later how many pills you've taken. Ask your pharmacist about a 'day to day' pill container
- ✓ make sure you understand the instructions and if not, ask your doctor, practice nurse or health visitor

And of course, you know...

- ✓ get a smoke alarm
- ✓ don't carry too much at once, get help with lifting heavy objects
- ✓ if you need to, get help with cleaning windows or putting in light bulbs
- ✓ always put fireguards around fires and never rest clothes or papers on them
- ✓ stairs are particularly dangerous, so make sure they are well-lit and the carpet doesn't slip about
- ✓ plan gardening and DIY jobs before you start, have the right tools and follow safety instructions for power tools and lawn-mowers

Further help and advice

- Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, Edgebaston Park, 353 Bristol Road, Birmingham B5 7ST, phone: 0121 248 2000
- Age Concern, Astral House, 1268 London Road, London SW16 4ER, phone 0181 679 8000
- National Osteoporosis Society, phone 01761 471771

Skin care

As we get older our skin naturally changes colour and loses the ability to produce the natural oils that keeps it soft and supple. It also has a tendency to 'thin' with age.

Most of the problems are minor and with the right treatment, help and advice, can be easily cleared up.

Some complaints that particularly affect older people are dry skin, eczema, psoriasis, dermatitis and urticaria (itching of the skin).

Most skin complaints are brought on by:

- allergies – to things that you have eaten, touched or have been bitten by!
- poor health – stress, circulation problems, bad diet, illness, tiredness
- changes in body temperature – having a piping hot bath, being outside on a dry, cold windy day

Damage to the skin can also happen when you have circulation problems and illnesses such as diabetes.

How to avoid and treat skin disorders

There are a few simple rules to follow to help avoid and treat skin disorders:

- ✓ try not to pick or scratch affected areas
- ✓ use moisturising, antihistamine or emollient creams or lotions
- ✓ avoid:
 - direct skin contact with cosmetic soaps, washing powders or chemical cleaners, etc
 - eating, drinking, inhaling or touching something you are allergic to
- ✓ wear rubber or cotton gloves to protect your hands
- ✓ be careful when out in the sun. Exposure to sun is good for you because your body will produce vitamin D, but wear a sunscreen and hat in strong sunlight or if you're out for long periods

- ✓ look for damage to your skin and keep it clean and dry – especially your feet if you have circulation problems or diabetes
- ✓ always check with your doctor to see if self-treatment is appropriate or the condition has not cleared up within a week

Symptoms

Most skin complaints show the same main symptoms:

- redness
- itching and/or soreness
- a breakdown of the outer layer of skin, eg flaking, crusting, blistering or weeping

Other symptoms are cracking, 'scaly' skin, varicose veins and raised blotchy skin.

Further help and advice

- The Psoriasis Association, phone 01604 711129
- The National Eczema Society, phone 0171 388 4097

Bowel problems

At any given time, 1 in 5 of the population is experiencing problems with their bowels.

Many people think bowel problems get more common as you get older, this is not true. It is the things that tend to go with old age that cause constipation, such as immobility, smaller appetite or having a hysterectomy.

Problems such as constipation, diarrhoea and Irritable Bowel Syndrome can be avoided or eased by changing your diet, taking more exercise and avoiding stress.

Tips for healthy bowels

- ✓ have a regular early morning routine: get up, have breakfast, go to the toilet, wash and dress at the same time every day
- ✓ always have breakfast. Eat something rich in fibre, such as Bran Flakes, wholemeal bread or dried fruit
- ✓ include fibre in the rest of your meals, eg peas, beans, fresh fruit, plenty of potatoes or bread. Introduce the fibre foods gradually, giving your digestive system time to adapt
- ✓ avoid foods that you know cause you to be constipated or suffer diarrhoea

- ✓ do not ignore the feeling to go to the toilet
- ✓ try to exercise regularly. This could include walking to the local shops, gardening or taking the stairs instead of the lift
- ✓ avoid stressful situations if possible and try not to bottle up feelings

Symptoms

The symptoms of bowel disorders are varied. A 'one off' attack of diarrhoea is no cause for concern. Symptoms to look out for include:

- pains in the stomach or bottom
- bloated feelings or a swollen stomach
- prolonged attacks of diarrhoea or constipation or both
- passing mucus or blood when you go to the toilet
- change in bowel habit

You should see your doctor if you experience such symptoms, particularly if they are unexpected or persistent.

Further help and advice

- The Continence Foundation, phone 0171 831 9831 (9.30am - 4.30pm)
- Incontact, phone 0171 530 3401 (Mon - Fri)
- The Spinal Injuries Association provide a Bowel and Bladder Factsheet for the disabled, phone 0181 444 2121

Diabetes

Diabetes in older people can be treated by diet alone, diet and tablets, or sometimes with insulin injections. If you developed diabetes before you were 40, it will probably be the insulin-dependent type which requires regular injections.

Diabetes mellitus, usually called diabetes, is a shortage of insulin causing your blood sugar levels to get too high.

If not well controlled, diabetes can lead to serious complications, including heart attacks and damage to the kidneys and eyes.

You are more likely than average to suffer from non insulin-dependent diabetes, if you are:

- over 40 years of age
- overweight
- from an Asian or African Caribbean background

How to help control diabetes

Looking after yourself is very important in controlling diabetes:

- ✓ stick to a diet that's low in sugar and fats, but high in carbohydrates and fibre. Use low-fat spreads instead of butter, yogurt instead of cream and eat more fibre, like fruit, vegetables, cereals or pulses
- ✓ keep active or exercise regularly - walking, swimming or cycling
- ✓ regularly test your blood sugar levels at home, with a 'home tester' kit – these are available from most high street chemists
- ✓ develop a routine at home, to make sure you don't miss any of your tablets
- ✓ if you smoke, give up. Smoking greatly increases the risk of developing other problems

Symptoms

Many people with non insulin-dependent diabetes have no obvious symptoms, but you may:

- feel thirsty all the time with a dry mouth
- have unexpected and rapid weight loss
- feel tired and weak
- have tingling or numbness in the legs, feet or fingers
- pass water more frequently

Further help and advice

- The British Diabetic Association
Careline, phone 0171 323 1531

Eye care

As you get older, you may find your eyesight is not as good as it was and that some medical conditions affect your eyes.

How to look after your eyes and eyesight

Have your eyes tested regularly to:

- show whether you need to wear glasses or contact lenses which will improve your eyesight
- make sure your eyesight does not deteriorate any more
- show up any other medical conditions, such as high blood pressure

If you have eyesight problems, make sure you have a good level of lighting at home, especially at the top and bottom of stairs and at your front and back doors.

If your eyes feel 'gritty' or sore, your doctor may be able to relieve the symptoms with eye drops or antibiotics, or refer you for an eye examination.

Symptoms

You may need to hold a book at arm's length to be able to read, or things may be blurred. If you are short sighted, you can see things which are close to you quite clearly but have difficulty seeing things which are further away.

If you are long sighted, this is the other way round.

Medical conditions that can affect your eyes

An **overactive thyroid** may:

- make your eyes water excessively
- make you feel as if there is something 'gritty' in your eyes
- cause pain in your eyes
- give you blurred or double vision
- make your eyes protrude and give you 'bags' under your eyes

Glaucoma is a condition which tends to develop after the age of 40 and is sometimes hereditary. If there is a family history, ask for tests. It is caused by a build up of pressure inside the eye which can damage your sight if it isn't treated. It can be treated by using eye drops.

Cataract often affects the eyes as people get older. It causes misty vision when the lens in the eye loses its transparency. It is easily detected during an eye examination and can be treated by simple surgery.

Diabetes can affect your eyes by causing blurred vision which can eventually lead to blindness.

Damage to your eyes caused by diabetes does not usually show obvious symptoms. This is why regular eye tests are very important if you have diabetes. Laser treatment can help prevent damage getting any worse.

Dry eyes are caused by the eyes producing not enough or the wrong type of tears. This makes the eyes feel itchy and uncomfortable. You can get artificial tears on prescription which will help.

Further help and advice

- The British Diabetic Association, 10 Queen Anne Street, London, W1M 0DB, phone 0171 323 1531
- The International Glaucoma Association, King's College Hospital, Denmark Hill, London, SE5 9RS, phone 0171 737 3265
- Eyecare Information Service, PO Box 3597, London, SE1 6DY, phone 0171 357 7730
- Thyroid Eye Disease, 34 Fore Street, Chindleigh, Devon TQ13 0HX, phone 01626 852980

High blood pressure

As we get older, blood pressure increases naturally as blood vessels become narrow and more rigid.

However, this may become a problem if you:

- have a family history of high blood pressure
- have kidney disease
- are overweight, drink a lot of alcohol or eat too much salt
- suffer from stress

High blood pressure is a major cause of many other illnesses:

- coronary heart disease
- angina – chest pain
- strokes – with high blood pressure you are seven times as likely to have a stroke
- kidney damage

Ways to avoid or reduce high blood pressure

Things that help lower your blood pressure are:

- ✓ giving up smoking. This is the probably the most important thing you can do and if you find that you can't give up, try to cut down how many cigarettes you smoke in a day

- ✓ regular exercise like walking, swimming or cycling. Simply being busy or running around in the car and dashing round a supermarket is not exercise
- ✓ losing weight – crash dieting doesn't usually work. Try to:
 - reduce fats in your diet, use low-fat spreads instead of butter or yogurt instead of cream
 - eat more fibre, like fruit, vegetables, cereals or pulses
- ✓ cutting out excess salt in your diet – try using spices or herbs to liven up your food
- ✓ moderate your drinking habits. Try to pace your drinking or 'stretch' out drinks with mixers like lemonade and soda. Do not drink more than 21 units a week
- ✓ if you have not had your blood pressure checked for some time, especially if you have a positive family history, then see your doctor, practice nurse or health visitor for a check and advice on having it checked again

Symptoms of high blood pressure

Most people with high blood pressure have no symptoms and they may feel very well, however some complain of:

- frequent headaches or nose bleeds
- a muzzy head or heavy-headed feeling
- dizziness

However, beware – most people do not have any symptoms or odd feelings at all!

Further help and advice

- British Heart Foundation, 14 Fitzhardinge Street, London W1H 4DH, phone 0171 935 0185
- Quit (Smokers helpline), Victory House, 170 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 0HA, Quitline 0800 002200 (12 noon-7pm)
- The Stroke Association, phone 0171 566 0300

Hormone Replacement Therapy

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) means taking tablets, using skin patches or other methods to replace the hormone oestrogen.

HRT is taken by women to eliminate menopausal symptoms and to help prevent osteoporosis and coronary heart disease.

HRT can relieve or prevent:

- menopausal symptoms:
 - hot flushes, night sweats, sleeplessness
 - vaginal dryness, urinary problems
 - headaches or joint pain
 - depression
- osteoporosis, bones which fracture easily
- risk of heart disease and stroke

Getting the best from HRT

If you worry about HRT or don't want to take it for a long time, discuss this with your doctor or practice nurse.

There are many ways to take HRT including, tablets, patches, gels applied to your skin and implants under the skin.

You and your doctor should discuss and work out the best method for you. Your doctor may need to adjust the dosage and type of HRT you take until both you and your doctor are happy.

Remember:

- ✓ always follow your doctor's instructions for taking the HRT
- ✓ if you develop any side effects, discuss them with your doctor, do not just stop taking your medication
- ✓ try to live a healthy and active lifestyle:
 - eat a healthy diet and limit the amount of alcohol you drink to no more than 21 units a week
 - don't smoke or try to cut down if you can't stop
 - exercise regularly or try to remain active

Side effects

Some women have fears about HRT and breast cancer. Studies have shown some increased risk of breast cancer for women on HRT.

For those who are on HRT for a short period the increased risk is very slight.

For all women the risk returns to normal five years after stopping HRT.

However, it is important to be breast aware and to attend for mammograms (breast x-ray) when called under the national screening programme. If you are over 65, you can ask to be screened.

If you have concerns about your HRT, discuss them with your doctor.

Further help and advice

- Women's Health Concerns Publications, phone 0181 780 3007
- Amarant Trust, phone 0171 490 1644

Leg ulcers

As we get older, our circulation may become sluggish making skin weaker and easier to injure. Leg ulcers can develop from a wound to the skin such as a minor scratch or a knock from something as simple as dropping a book on your leg.

Ways to prevent leg ulcers

Leg ulcers can be prevented by:

- ✓ always making sure your skin is clean and dry and checking for damage
- ✓ taking regular exercise such as walking, this will help improve circulation. If you cannot get about easily, try doing leg exercises in your chair
- ✓ having a healthy diet, this will help the body fight infection. Eat plenty of fresh vegetables and fruit
- ✓ giving up smoking
- ✓ wearing support tights, especially if you are on your feet all day. You can buy support tights from your local chemist, or you may be able to get them on prescription from your doctor

Symptoms

Symptoms of leg ulcers include a simple wound, often over a vein, that:

- is not healing
- has worn away and may look like a hole
- is a shallow irregular shape
- seeps fluid, but not blood
- is inflamed and painful, this is usually a sign of infection

If you think you have a leg ulcer, do not treat it yourself. Go to your doctor or see a practice nurse. Leg ulcers will heal up if the right treatment is received.

Further help and advice

- your doctor, practice nurse or community nurse

Pressure sores

You don't have to be stuck in bed to get pressure sores, usually known as bed sores. If you spend a lot of time in bed, a wheelchair or armchair, you may develop pressure sores.

Pressure sores can develop in only a few hours and usually:

- develop on parts of your body which take your weight or are bony – your heels, ankles, knees, hips, bottom, base of your spine, elbows or shoulders
- start with your skin getting slightly redder or darker than usual, then turning into a blister and eventually a deep hole in your skin
- can take months to heal, don't usually get better without treatment and can become infected

How to avoid pressure sores

In bed

- ✓ change the position you lie in every two hours
- ✓ put pillows between your knees and ankles

- ✓ use a duvet not heavy blankets. Avoid nylon sheets

- ✓ avoid crumbs or creases in your bedclothes and sheets
- ✓ if you sit up in bed, don't slide back down under the covers

In a wheelchair

- ✓ take the weight off your bottom every 15 minutes or so, by leaning forward
- ✓ get a special cushion to relieve the pressure

Generally

- ✓ lift arms and legs, don't drag them when moving or getting up, it's better exercise and you won't rub your skin
- ✓ check every day for skin that doesn't return to its normal colour when you take your weight off it

- ✓ never lie on skin that is redder than normal

- ✓ keep your skin dry and clean, especially if you suffer from incontinence
- ✓ don't rub or massage your skin too hard
- ✓ don't use talcum powder – it dries out your skin
- ✓ eat a healthy diet and drink plenty of fluids
- ✓ if you can, get out of your bed or chair for a short walk every hour or so

Further help and advice

- see your community nurse, health visitor or physiotherapist if you have one

Urinary incontinence

Bladder problems

Incontinence is very common. At least 1 in 4 women will have problems controlling their bladder at some time in their life. 40% of women over age 65 suffer from incontinence.

The most common types of urinary incontinence are stress and urge incontinence. Stress incontinence is caused by weak pelvic floor muscles, often damaged during childbirth. Urge incontinence can occur at any time but gets more likely as you get older.

Ways to control incontinence

In most cases incontinence can be cured or improved. Also, there are ways to control both stress and urge incontinence:

- ✓ pelvic floor exercises strengthen the muscles. Sit or stand with your legs slightly apart, squeeze at the front as if you are trying to stop passing urine, hold the contraction for ten seconds. Now, squeeze at the back and hold for ten seconds. Repeat this exercise at least eight times a day

- ✓ drink at least 3-4 pints of water a day and less tea and coffee
- ✓ keep active and exercise if possible
- ✓ you might find it helps to train your bladder to behave more predictably. Aim for a minimum of two hours and a maximum of five hours between going to the toilet. Avoid going 'just in case'

You can put off the urge to go to the toilet by:

- ✓ contracting the pelvic floor muscles
- ✓ pressing around the bladder outlet or sitting on a rolled up towel
- ✓ thinking about things you have to do - distract your mind

Symptoms of urinary incontinence

- going to the toilet more than eight times a day
- getting up more than once in the night to go to the toilet
- wetting yourself when you cough, sneeze or jump
- wetting the bed
- not making it to the toilet in time

Further help and advice

- your doctor or district nurse
- The Continence Foundation provide a confidential helpline Monday to Friday, 9.30am to 4.30pm, phone 0171 831 9831
- Incontact, phone 0171 530 3401

Bereavement

The loss of a loved one is very stressful and can leave you feeling physically unwell for many months. You may feel guilty or angry. These are natural feelings and are part of grieving.

Your feelings after bereavement

There is no standard way of grieving as we are all individuals. However most people experience feelings of grief in much the same order:

- disbelief or denial - carrying on as though nothing has happened
- shock or numbness - a feeling of unreality. This can become a problem if it goes on for too long
- yearning or pining for the person who has died - imagining they still see or hear them, feeling very agitated, having difficulty sleeping, relaxing or concentrating
- guilt - feeling they could have done more. Going over and over things they could have said or done, or feeling guilty because they feel a sense of relief when someone has died after a painful or distressing illness
- anger - at everyone, or friends and relatives because they didn't do enough, or even at the person who has died

- anxiety - how will they cope without the person they have lost
- depression - this means mood swings, difficulty in sleeping, loss of appetite, and spasms of grief sparked by things, places or people that remind them of the dead person

Coping with bereavement

Everyone copes with death in different ways but there are some things that people have found a help or comfort:

- spend time with family and friends. If you feel like crying - do so - don't try to hold it back. Equally if you don't feel like crying - don't feel guilty - everyone is different, just because you don't feel like crying it doesn't mean you aren't grieving properly
- talk about the person who has died. Especially to someone who knew them and can share the memories. It can also be helpful to talk to someone other than family or friends (see *Further help and advice*)

- try to return to your normal activities after about a week or so
- look after yourself by eating and resting properly. See your doctor if you are worried about your health, especially if you are suffering from sleeplessness or loss of appetite
- don't avoid going out and try to keep in contact with people
- accept practical offers of help with things like shopping and cleaning
- if you feel you are not able to cope or feel you are getting more depressed there are people, including your doctor, who are there to help (see *Further help and advice*)

Further help and advice

- Compassionate friends offers friendship and support to bereaved parents of children of all ages, phone 0117 953 9639

Coping with dementia

The popular view of dementia is that it is inevitable as you get older, but there are far more elderly people with all their faculties intact than there are sufferers from dementia.

When dementia is diagnosed, it is impossible to predict how someone will respond to their treatment. Someone with dementia can still have a good quality of life if they have good support.

Symptoms of dementia

The type and seriousness of symptoms between individuals and types of dementia vary greatly, but there are three stages to the disease:

Early stages

- can't remember recent events or things like whether they have eaten
- concentration and decision making is difficult
- long term memory is still OK
- becomes disorientated about time and places, forgets names of family and friends, becomes agitated, suffers sleeplessness and lack of appetite
- may become moody and irritable over little things

Moderate dementia:

- confusion, forgetfulness and mood changes are more obvious. May become anxious and aggressive, wander off, become suspicious of loved ones and restless at nights. Things like dressing become very difficult

Final stages:

- probably cannot recognise close family and friends
- may not be able to speak clearly or understand what is being said
- may become bedridden or wheelchair bound

Dealing with dementia

Although there is as yet no cure, drugs can help to relieve the depression, restlessness, aggression and irritability that are often part of the illness.

If you are worried, you must see your doctor because things like thyroid and vitamin deficiencies, drugs, depression, and head injury can cause dementia-like symptoms

- ✓ control high blood pressure
- ✓ take an interest in day to day events
- ✓ use memory aids such as lists
- ✓ accept help like meals on wheels or a home help to help you maintain some independence
- ✓ keep to a daily routine if you can. Keep a calendar and clock handy to help you if you get confused
- ✓ make sure your home is safe, remember to turn off the gas at the mains when you go out, don't leave matches lying around
- ✓ as long term memory remains good, try to reduce any anxiety you are feeling by relaxing with an old photograph album to help remember happy times

Further help and advice

- Alzheimer's Helpline, phone 0845 300 0336 (8am-6pm)
- Mind, a mental health charity, phone 0181 519 2122

Coping with depression

Feeling anxious or depressed can happen to anyone whatever their age. Usually we start to feel better, but with depression the symptoms don't go away and it affects every part of your thinking, behaviour and health. When you are older the things that can lead to depression are ill health and bereavement.

Depression is treatable and it is very important to get help.

Tips for dealing with depression

There are plenty of things you can do to deal with depression:

- ✓ talk to someone and tell them how you feel. Talking about how you feel does help. Don't be afraid to talk to your doctor or practice nurse at any stage. Medication may help you. Alternatively, your doctor can refer you for other treatments
- ✓ try to remain active and get out. Staying at home can make you brood about things. If you find it difficult to get out and about, let family, friends or neighbours take you out. If you go to a day centre, they may have transport you can use
- ✓ try to keep eating properly even if you have lost your appetite. It's very important to make sure you don't run short of important vitamins and minerals. Don't 'comfort eat' with chocolate and biscuits

- ✓ don't use alcohol to make you feel better, it is a depressant and will make you feel worse
- ✓ remember you are ill - you are not letting people down or being lazy
- ✓ don't worry:
 - try to get as much sleep as you need, but if you can't sleep properly, get up and read or take a bath. When the depression lifts you will be able to sleep better
 - depression does not lead to things like dementia or senility

Symptoms of depression

Feeling sad or low is only one of the symptoms of depression.

Other symptoms to watch for are:

- feeling worried and anxious, restless and unable to rest or relax properly
- a worse than normal feeling of sadness or being 'down' which often 'lifts' later in the day
- loss of interest in the things that usually give you pleasure

- feeling tired when you are not doing much. Even the simplest task becomes a major effort and you don't feel like doing anything
- loss of appetite and weight loss or gain
- wanting to avoid other people, or being snappy and irritable with them
- poor sleep, especially waking very early or difficulty getting to sleep
- loss of self confidence, feeling useless, a burden, guilty or a bad person
- thoughts of suicide (this must be taken seriously and you must get help immediately)

Further help and advice

- Depression Alliance, phone 0171 633 9929
- Fellowship of Depressives Anonymous, phone 01482 860619 (social hours)
- Age Concern, phone 0181 679 8000
- Samaritans, phone 0345 909090

Coping with stress

What is stressful varies from person to person and each person's ability to cope is so different, so it is difficult to say exactly what will cause stress. Anything that makes you tense, unhappy, angry, or frustrated can cause stress.

Some stress is good for us, it helps us to achieve things. Problems occur when stress goes on for too long, is destructive or we cannot cope.

Tips for dealing with stress

Once you realise you are suffering from stress, there's lots you can do to relax:

- ✓ identify what causes you stress and learn how to avoid or adapt to it. Sort out what really matters to you and concentrate on that
- ✓ you might be trying to do too much - see if you can change things to give you more time
- ✓ if you are worried about stress, talk to someone straight away. You might find that this helps immediately. See your doctor if you are worried about your health
- ✓ find time to relax for at least an hour every day, take a warm bath, a relaxing walk, read a book, do a puzzle or listen to music

- ✓ keep active - it makes you feel better, distracts you and is good for burning off stress. Exercise regularly if you can
- ✓ try to get enough sleep. Don't lie in bed worrying if you can't sleep, listen to the radio with ear plugs, if necessary, get up and read or have a hot bath
- ✓ consider taking up yoga, meditation or learning other relaxation techniques
- ✓ don't be too hard on yourself - live for now, do not dwell on past mistakes or disappointments

Symptoms of stress

The signs that stress is affecting you will be different for everyone. However, stress often shows itself through these symptoms:

- physical reactions, such as headaches, feeling faint, weak or trembling, changes in appetite and weight, rapid or uneven heartbeat, fast shallow breathing, indigestion, constipation or diarrhoea, tiredness, dry mouth or throat, loss of sexual interest

- moodiness, irritability or tearfulness
- other emotional reactions, such as feeling under pressure, tense, not being able to relax, concentrate, make decisions or enjoy yourself, feeling restless frustrated or aggressive, more suspicious, wanting to run away and hide
- a change in your sleep patterns, especially waking early
- drinking or smoking more

Further help and advice

- Age Concern, phone 0181 679 8000
- MIND - can provide a sympathetic ear, information and advice, phone 0181 519 2122 or local rate number 0345 660163
- Samaritans - can also provide a sympathetic ear, information and advice, National Helpline, phone 0345 909090

Arthritis and rheumatism

Arthritis in general is an inflammation of the joints causing pain and stiffness.

The main varieties of arthritis are:

- osteoarthritis: this can affect anybody, but gets more common as you get older. This mainly affects joints which have had a lot of use
- rheumatoid arthritis: this is a chronic active form of arthritis which often affects the joints in the hands. It can occur in the young and middle aged as well as the older person
- rheumatism: this is a vague term meaning pain and stiffness in muscles and bones rather than joints

How to help arthritis or rheumatism

You can help by:

- ✓ starting regular gentle exercising like swimming, this is easier on your joints – it gets you fit and strengthens your muscles

- ✓ if a joint is particularly painful, rest it first and then start moving it slowly – in a warm bath if that's easier
- ✓ carefully choosing the way you sit or carry things, to ensure you don't strain yourself
- ✓ as your body weight is borne by your hip and knee joints, if you need to lose weight:
 - reduce the fat in your diet, by using low-fat spreads instead of butter or yogurt instead of cream
 - eat more fibre, like fruit, vegetables, cereals or pulses

Arthritis and rheumatism are very painful conditions, which usually need drugs to relieve the pain.

There are other ways to help reduce the pain, like:

- ✓ having physiotherapy or a massage may soothe and help relieve the pain
- ✓ place a hot water bottle or alternatively an ice pack on the affected area to ease the pain

Symptoms

The symptoms of arthritis and rheumatism are very similar:

- aches and pains in the bones and muscles
- joints swell up, are uncomfortable, feel hot and may become stiff
- often you feel tired, irritable, depressed or just generally unwell

Further help and advice

- Arthritis Care, phone 0171 916 1500

Asthma and chronic bronchitis

Asthma and chronic bronchitis are conditions which affect your lungs.

- asthma is an inflammation and narrowing of the airways. Its cause is unknown, but it can be triggered by an allergic reaction to something you have breathed in or touched or by colds, flu, cigarette smoke, car fumes or exercise
- chronic bronchitis is also an inflammation of the airways that causes breathlessness and coughing. It is most commonly caused by smoking

How to avoid and control asthma or chronic bronchitis

Asthma

- ✓ can be controlled by drugs: *preventers* which help stop attacks, *relievers* which ease breathing during an attack and *protectors* which act like relievers, but last longer
- ✓ can be avoided by:
 - firstly identifying the 'trigger' that sets it off, eg house dust mite, animals, pollen etc

- secondly reducing your exposure to that 'trigger', eg use a mattress cover, don't keep a cat or dog, avoid going out on hot, dry days etc

Chronic bronchitis

- ✓ can be controlled by drugs eg *relievers* which ease breathing. Exacerbations triggered by infections may need treatment with antibiotics
- ✓ can be avoided by making sure:
 - you give up smoking
 - if you have a cough that won't go away, you see your doctor

For both conditions, try to:

- ✓ stop smoking or reduce the number of cigarettes you smoke a day
- ✓ start exercising to get fit and keep your muscles strong
- ✓ relax at least once a day, take up yoga or breathe from your diaphragm, so your abdomen moves out when you breathe in

Symptoms

The symptoms of:

- **asthma** are coughing, wheezing, tightness and soreness of the chest and a shortness of breath – which can vary from mild breathlessness to respiratory failure
- **chronic bronchitis** are coughing – with phlegm, breathlessness, and possibly excessive sleepiness, drowsiness or confusion

Chronic bronchitis can also interfere with the body's ability to get oxygen into the blood and remove carbon dioxide. Ask your doctor if home oxygen treatment would benefit you.

Further help and advice

- National Asthma Campaign Helpline, phone 0345 010 203 (Mon-Fri 9am-7pm)

Breast cancer

1 in 12 women develop breast cancer, but if the cancer is found early enough, a full recovery is usually made.

Being 'breast aware' is the best way to pick up early signs.

Be 'breast aware'

Look at your breasts and know what is normal for you. After the menopause, normal breasts feel soft, less firm and not lumpy.

Look out for:

- any changes in the outline or the shape of the breast
- discomfort or pain, especially if it is new or persistent
- unusual lumps, thickening or bumpy areas
- any unusual changes in, or discharge from, your nipples

9 out of 10 lumps are not breast cancer, but if you find a lump or notice any changes, see your doctor immediately.

The NHS offers breast screening every three years for women aged 50 to 64 and on request for women over 65.

If you are worried you may be at higher risk of getting breast cancer because other women in your family have had the disease, talk to your doctor who may refer you to a specialist clinic.

Further help and advice

- Cancerlink, freephone 0800 132905
- Breast Cancer Care, phone 0500 245345

Cancer affects the lives of thousands of women and their families every year. But we are finding out more about cancer - how to detect it, treat it and in some cases cure it.

Cancer can affect various parts of the body, including the breasts, skin, ovaries, cervix (neck of the womb).

Detecting cancer

The earlier a cancer is found, the more chance there is of a complete cure. It is very important that you check for the early signs and always take advantage of opportunities for screening.

Breast Cancer

Look out for:

- any changes in the outline or the shape of the breast
- discomfort or pain, especially if it is new or persistent
- unusual lumps, thickening or bumpy areas
- any unusual changes in, or discharge from, your nipples

Skin Cancer

Look out for moles that:

- are getting larger or are bigger than the blunt end of a pencil
- have an irregular outline or are different colours of brown and black
- itch, bleed or are sore

Ovarian Cancer

This type of cancer is rare, but is more common after age 45. Look out for:

- unusual swelling in the stomach
- vaginal bleeding
- unplanned weight loss

Reducing the risk of cancer

The risk of developing cancer can be reduced by:

- ✓ having a healthy low fat diet with plenty of fresh fruit and vitamins
- ✓ giving up smoking
- ✓ watching your weight

To prevent skin cancer:

- ✓ seek the shade and avoid the sun between 11am and 3pm
- ✓ cover up with long sleeves, hats and sunglasses
- ✓ use sun cream and take care not to burn

Further help and advice

If you notice any of the changes described above, contact your doctor immediately. If you do not want to see your doctor, you can go to a local Well Woman clinic.

- Cancerlink, freephone 0800 132905
- Breast Cancer Care, phone 0500 245345
- the Beth Johnson Foundation for advice about diet and exercise, phone 01782 844036

Heart disease

Most women imagine that heart disease affects men only. In fact one in four women die through heart disease.

Heart disease gets more common with age and you are more likely to get it if other close relatives have had heart problems. Women with diabetes are over three times more likely to develop heart disease. Women from some ethnic backgrounds are also more at risk.

How to prevent heart disease or stop it getting worse

The most important way to prevent heart disease or to stop it getting worse is to live a healthy lifestyle:

- ✓ if you smoke, give up. If you can't stop, cut down
- ✓ take regular exercise if possible. Exercise improves your circulation, helps lower blood pressure and improve cholesterol levels (never ignore chest pains that happen because you are exercising). If you are not sure about which exercises are suitable for you or if you have any medical worries, see your doctor

- ✓ eat a healthy diet including fresh fruit and vegetables, carbohydrates and a little protein. Cut down the amount of fat you eat and use less salt. If your diet is poor, taking vitamin supplements - A, C and E can give you some protection against heart disease
- ✓ keeping your weight under control is very important. Carrying excess weight can damage your heart
- ✓ drink alcohol at a moderate level. One or two units of alcohol a day can reduce your chances of having a heart attack
- ✓ avoid stress and try to reduce its effect, for example by taking exercise combined with relaxation techniques or by listening to relaxation tapes or taking time out to read for pleasure

- ✓ get your doctor to check you for:
 - signs of high blood pressure
 - high cholesterol - too much cholesterol is what furs up or blocks arteries
- ✓ if you already have heart disease, or smoke, or have a high cholesterol level, discuss oestrogen replacement therapy (HRT) with your doctor

Symptoms of heart disease

Heart disease is damage to the heart caused by the narrowing of the coronary arteries. At first there may not be any noticeable symptoms. As heart disease progresses, it can lead to chest pain (angina). If an artery becomes blocked, part of the heart dies leading to a heart attack.

The symptoms of heart disease are:

- angina - a tight chest pain sometimes spreading to the neck and arms that comes on during exercise or excitement and which fades with rest. It can cause faintness, giddiness and feeling sick
- irregular heart beat - feels like extra beats or activity by your heart, and you may feel faint or breathless
- breathlessness - but not from being unfit
- heart attack - pain in the chest which may spread down the left arm or both arms or into the throat or jaw. The pain is often described as crushing or vice-like but sometimes as like indigestion. You can also feel cold, clammy, faint, giddy or sick
- depression and panic disorders can result from heart disease
- see your doctor as soon as possible if you suffer symptoms such as palpitations, angina or unusual breathlessness

Further help and advice

- British Heart Foundation, phone 0171 935 0185
- British Diabetic Association, 10 Queen Anne Street, London W1M 0BD
- QUIT for help to give up smoking, Quitline (free) 0800 002200

Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis, the disease where bones fracture very easily, mainly affects women after the menopause. It is a gradual thinning of the bone density, which leads to an increase in the risk of fracture.

You are at greater risk of developing osteoporosis if you:

- had an early menopause
- have had your ovaries removed
- are thin or small boned
- have taken long-term oral corticosteroids
- have already broken a bone after a minor bump or fall
- have suffered loss of periods for more than 6 months (pregnancy excluded)
- have a strong family history of fractures, eg in your mother or grandmother

Reducing the risk of developing osteoporosis

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) plays a very important role in preventing osteoporosis by replacing oestrogen which the body has stopped producing at the menopause.

There are many different ways of taking HRT – tablets, implants, patches on the skin or skin gel. You should discuss your suitability for HRT with your doctor.

Leading a healthy lifestyle can help reduce the risk of developing osteoporosis:

- ✓ weight bearing activities such as keep-fit and walking help keep bones healthy. Ideally, you should do 30 minutes of this kind of exercise three times a week. Try walking instead of using the car or bus, take the stairs instead of the lift
- ✓ have a healthy balanced diet, eat foods which contain calcium and vitamin D, eg milk, bread, margarine, green vegetables and oily fish, like sardines and herrings
- ✓ try to get out in the daylight. This helps the body to produce vitamin D naturally. If it is sunny, remember to use sunscreen and wear a hat
- ✓ avoid heavy smoking and reduce your alcohol intake

Symptoms

Symptoms of osteoporosis include:

- fractures of the wrist, hips and bones in the spine
- back pain
- loss of height

Further help and advice

- The National Osteoporosis Society, phone 01761 472721
- Women's Health Concern, phone 0181 780 3007

A stroke is when part of the brain is suddenly severely damaged, when the blood supply to the brain is interrupted, usually because of high blood pressure.

How a stroke affects someone depends on which part of the brain has been damaged, but it usually causes:

- weakness or paralysis in an arm or leg – sometimes both
- speech difficulties
- lack of co-ordination or mobility

Mini strokes

Some people experience mini strokes. The signs of these are similar to those of strokes but only last up to 24 hours. Common symptoms include weakness or numbness of the face, arm or leg on one side of the body, slurring of speech and loss of vision. If you experience these symptoms, it is important to see your doctor.

Ways to avoid or reduce the risk of having a stroke

Some strokes can be prevented by detecting and treating high blood pressure early, so if you are being treated for high blood pressure continue with your treatment.

You can help avoid or reduce the risk of having a stroke by reducing your blood pressure, by:

- ✓ giving up smoking or cutting down the number of cigarettes you smoke
- ✓ starting regular exercise, like walking, swimming or cycling
- ✓ losing weight, by reducing the fats in your diet and eating more fibre
- ✓ cutting out excess salt in your diet – use herbs and spices to 'liven up' your food
- ✓ drinking alcohol in moderation and don't drink more than 21 units a week (one unit equals a glass of wine)

If you have already had a stroke, ask your doctor about other medicines that may help prevent you having another one.

Symptoms

There are no symptoms as such before a stroke. High blood pressure is the main cause of a stroke. This has no specific symptoms, in fact lots of people with high blood pressure feel very well, however some people do notice:

- frequent headaches and/or nosebleeds
- a muzzy head or heavy-headed feeling
- dizziness

However remember most people do not have any symptoms or odd feelings at all!

It is a good idea to have your blood pressure checked if you have not had it done for some time and you have a family history of heart disease and strokes.

Further help and advice

There are a number of professional people who can help stroke patients regain their mobility, speech and independence, like physiotherapists or speech and language therapists. These people can be contacted through your doctor or local health authority.

- Stroke Association, phone 0171 566 0300
- Quit (Smokers helpline), phone 0800 002200
- The Beth Johnson Foundation for advice about diet and exercise, phone 01782 844 036

Thyroid diseases

The thyroid gland lies at the front of the neck. It controls our metabolism and is responsible for the normal working of the cells in our body.

Thyroid diseases are fairly common, affecting about one in twenty people. All types of thyroid disease are more common in women, especially as we get older.

The thyroid gland can be:

- overactive
- underactive
- enlarged

Symptoms of thyroid diseases

An **overactive** thyroid is usually due to Graves' disease. The cause of Graves' disease is not known but a family history of thyroid problems or stress due to major life events, eg divorce or death of a close relative, may play a role. Symptoms of Graves' disease are:

- a loss of weight despite a good appetite
- sweating and feeling hot, even in very cold places
- a noticeable increase in the heart beat, breathlessness and tremors

- raised itchy patches on the lower leg and feet
- protruding watery eyes
- muscle weakness

The thyroid can become **underactive**. The cause is not known, but it can be caused by treatment for Graves' disease. Symptoms of an underactive thyroid are:

- weight gain without an increase in appetite
- sensitivity to the cold, including muscle stiffness and spasms
- dry and yellow skin
- a slow heart beat and possibly high blood pressure
- lethargy
- deafness and trouble with your balance

An **enlarged** thyroid is known as a goitre. The goitre may have become enlarged during childhood, but by middle age it develops lumps which are more obvious. Signs that you may have a goitre include:

- swelling and discomfort in the neck

- difficulty swallowing food or breathing
- a change in voice

As most of these diseases can be successfully treated - even thyroid cancer if it is detected early enough - you must see your doctor if you think you have a thyroid disease. They will take a blood sample which will identify the problem.

It is important to follow your doctor's instructions for taking your medication.

If Graves' disease is causing eye problems and you smoke, try to give up or cut down.

Further help and advice

- the British Thyroid Foundation, PO Box 97, Clifford, Wetherby, LS23 6XD
- Thyroid Eye Disease, phone 01626 852980

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